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AMERICA'S FIRST GRAND OPERA SEASON

By FRANCIS ROGERS

GRAND Opera in the United States is now so firmly established in our affection and interests that it is hard to realize that its full acceptance by us as a legitimate form of amusement dates back scarcely more than fifty years, and that its total history is less than a century old. The first performance of opera on record in Europe was given in the last decade of the sixteenth century, but this country had been settled for more than two hundred years before it saw its first real operatic performance.

The year 1825 is memorable in American musical annals, because it was then that grand opera had its first hearing in our country. In the autumn of that year Manuel Garcia, with a small troupe of European singers, which included his wife, his son and his daughter, landed in New York and announced a season of opera during which, as he put it, "the choicest Italian operas will be performed in a style which he flatters himself will give general satisfaction."

Manuel Garcia occupies a prominent position in musical history and, both figuratively and literally, deserves the title of "father of modern singing." He was born in Seville in 1775 and at the age of six was a chorister in the cathedral. The fact that at the time of his birth there was not one pianoforte in all Seville shows how meager were the opportunities to obtain a good musical education, but, somehow or other, Garcia managed to learn at least the rudiments of singing and music, and at the age of seventeen was well-known as composer, singer, actor and conductor. By the time he was thirty his ambitions and energy had exhausted the possibilities for artistic glory in Spain and persuaded him to try his fortune in Paris, then at the height of its Napoleonic splendor. So in 1808 he made his debut there, singing for the first time in the Italian language. Despite many crudities in his style of singing and in his acting, his naturally fine tenor voice, his fiery spirit and his handsome person won for him at once the hearty admiration of the Parisian public. As an old French singer expressed it,— "I love the Andalusian frenzy of the man. He puts life into everything."

In 1812 he went to Naples to sing and there, for the first time in his life, had an opportunity to study the art of singing and the theory of music under the best auspices. It was at this time that he met the young Rossini, who wrote several operatic parts for him, including that of Almaviva in "*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*." This association was beneficial to both men, and especially to Garcia, for it gave him an authoritative position as interpreter of the most popular composer of the epoch. When he returned to Paris three or four years later everybody remarked the wonderful progress he had made in every branch of his art and when he appeared in London in 1817 he was acclaimed as the greatest tenor of the day. Not content with his triumphs on the stage he began to give lessons in singing in both London and Paris and so excellent was his method of teaching that what he taught, handed down by his son and other able pupils, is still, eighty years after his death, a living influence.

In all history there is no singer to match Garcia in combined energy, intelligence and versatility. For him difficulties and obstacles were merely stimulants; the harder his task, the more willingly and the better he performed it. His nerve and self-confidence were monumental. We have said that at his debut in Paris he ventured to sing in a language only recently learned. At his first rehearsal in Naples he was anxious to show the orchestra that they had do with a singer far above the ordinary. His first air was written and played by the orchestra in one key, but Garcia sang it through unswervingly just a half-tone higher. When he began, the musicians thought he had made a mistake or that his ear was faulty, but when they discovered that he was performing perfectly a very difficult feat they give him a hearty round of applause. No performance in which he took part ever languished; he dominated and animated everybody associated with him.

As a singer, he affected the florid style then in vogue and invented vocal difficulties for himself, apparently for the mere pleasure of proving to the public that nothing was too hard for him. He was man of over-bearing and fiery temper and a stern taskmaster in the class-room, as well as on the stage. People passing his house in Paris used often to hear the sound of weeping. If they inquired its cause, they were told, "It's only Mr. Garcia teaching his pupils how to sing." In addition to his busy life as singer and teacher, he found the time in the course of his career to compose some forty operas in French, Spanish and Italian, both words and music!

Madame Garcia seems to have had no talent as a singer and would probably never have sung publicly at all, if her autocratic husband had not insisted on it. He strove hard, too, to make an opera singer of his son, Manuel, who, although he was musical and industrious, had neither voice nor aptitude for the stage. He was only twenty when he made his operatic début in New York and five years later retired from the theater finally and devoted the remainder of his extraordinarily long life of one hundred and one years to the teaching of singing. He became the most famous teacher of the century and numbered among his pupils such great singers and teachers as Jenny Lind, Charles Santley, Marchesi and Stockhausen. Through him the best traditions of the eighteenth century were handed down direct to the twentieth.

Maria Garcia, the daughter, better known to us under her married name of Malibran, was only nineteen when she first sang in New York. She had already appeared in London and Paris, but her first triumphs were won in New York and paved the way for her glorious though brief career in Europe. She was wonderfully equipped for her work. Although she was small in stature and not regularly beautiful, her appearance was singularly ingratiating. Her voice was of large compass and had been trained with the greatest care by Garcia himself, the best teacher of his time. From her father, too, she inherited exuberant vitality, self-confidence and musical talent. In addition, she possessed a charm and a personal magnetism that no one could resist and that simply swept everything before them.

Of the other members of the company there is little or nothing to say, except that they were competent to fill minor roles respectably. The London critics thought the company decidedly mediocre, but with such a man as Garcia to head it and such a *prima donna* as Maria to win hearts as well as applause, the troupe was quite equal to the task of arousing the enthusiastic interest and support of a small, provincial town like New York.

It is not easy to determine why Garcia undertook to be "our musical Columbus" (as one of the newspapers of the day dubbed him). Dominick Lynch, a New York importer of French wines, seems to have been concerned in the venture and one or two others, whose names alone have come down to us. Garcia himself may have first conceived the idea, for he was born of the stuff that makes pioneers. He was now fifty years of age and his hearers in Europe were beginning to find that his vocal powers were becoming somewhat impaired. He may have thought that an inexperienced and uncritical public would offer him a better

field than the sophisticated audiences of Europe, which had heard him in his best days. Great singers since his time have come to us with the same thought in mind! Besides, America would serve as a good training-school in which to try out the talents of his son and daughter. With the first roles in the hands of four Garcias and the second roles sung by obscure singers, his salary list must have been so small as to have rendered the financial risk of the undertaking comparatively slight.

The season opened November 29th, 1825, at the Park Theater¹ with Rossini's "Barber of Seville", sung in Italian. The troupe had arrived four or five weeks earlier. That month must have been a busy one for Garcia. He had to collect a chorus of local singers and teach them to sing a kind of music entirely unfamiliar to them in a language of which they presumably knew nothing. In addition, his orchestra, which was composed of about twenty-four local musicians, was nearly as green as his chorus, and equally unversed in Rossini's music. Garcia's task would have daunted even an Oscar Hammerstein!

New York had never heard an Italian opera. The few Americans that had traveled in Europe had brought back tales of the wonders of it, but the vast majority had not the faintest idea what sort of thing it was. Theatrical journalism in New York was in its swaddling clothes in 1825. Advance notices were of the most meagre description, and even after the first performance no one knew just what to say about it all. One paper said quite frankly:

We have been disappointed in not receiving a scientific critique, which we were promised, from a professor on the Italian opera of Tuesday night; we shall, however, have something to say later.

It is not surprising that the conventions and incongruities of Italian opera should have puzzled a public that had no traditions of respect or familiarity to steady them, but everybody seems to have resolved to enjoy what he could and to reserve his definite verdict until he could get his musical bearings.

The price of tickets was high for those days: two dollars for box seats, one dollar for a seat in the pit, and twenty-five cents entrance; but fashionable society, then as now, was willing to pay high for its opera and mustered in full force on the opening night, happy in the thought that it was following the custom of fashionable Europe.

¹The Park Theater was situated in Park Row opposite the site of the present Post Office.

Joseph Bonaparte, ex-King of Spain, was there, and James Fenimore Cooper, and Fitz-Greene Halleck, the poet, best remembered as the author of "Marco Bozzaris," who promptly fell not too deeply in love with Maria Garcia, and wrote a charming poem in her honor. One newspaper reporter wrote:

An assemblage of ladies so fashionable, so numerous and so elegantly dressed had probably never been witnessed in an American theatre. In what language shall we speak of an entertainment so novel in this country, but which has so long ranked as the most elegant and refined among the amusements of the higher classes of the old world. But report can give but a faint idea of it. Until it is seen, it will never be believed that a play can be conducted in *recitative* or singing and yet appear nearly as natural as the ordinary drama. We were last night surprised, delighted, enchanted, and such were the feelings of all who witnessed the performance. The repeated plaudits with which the theater rung were unequivocal, unaffected bursts of applause.

Of the orchestra we read:

The violins might be a little too loud; but one soul seemed to inspire and a single hand to guide the whole band throughout the magic mazes of Rossini's most intricate flights under the direction of Mr. de Luce; while Mr. Etienne presided in an effective manner at a fine-toned piano, of which every now and then he might be heard to touch the keynote by those whose attention was turned that way, and just loud enough to be heard throughout the orchestra, for whose guidance it was intended.

From this paragraph we may infer that the orchestra was not always in time or in tune and that newspapers editors in 1825 were more lenient towards long-winded sentences than editors are nowadays.

In writing of the company as a whole, the representative of the *New York Evening Post* said:

Their style or manner of acting differs from any to which we have been accustomed. In the male performers you are struck with the variety, novelty, and passion of their expressive, characteristic and unceasing gesticulation. The female performers, on the contrary, appeared to us to have less action, though quite as much expression, as any we had before seen. There is indeed, in their style of acting a most remarkable chasteness and propriety, never violating good taste nor exceeding the bounds of female decorum.

The same writer goes on to say:

Signor Garcia indulges in a florid style of singing; but with his fine voice, admirable ear, and brilliancy of execution we could not be otherwise than delighted.

Even if Garcia's voice had lost something of its youthful freshness, we can be sure that he sang the music, which Rossini

had written for him, with authority and skill, and that his impersonation of Almoviva was as dashing and spirited as ever it had been.

The New York public may have been unsophisticated in operatic matters, but it was quick to recognize in Maria Garcia an artist of transcendent qualities. The reporter of the *Post* says:

Her voice is what is denominated in the Italian a fine contra-alto and her science and skill in its management are such as to enable her to run over every tone and semi-tone of three octaves with an ease and grace that cost apparently no effort. She does not adopt the florid style of her father, but one which is less assuming and perhaps more proper in a lady and hardly less effective. Her person is about the middle height, slightly *embonpoint*; her eyes dark, arch, and expressive, and a playful smile is almost constantly the companion of her lips. She was the magnet who attracted all eyes and won all hearts. She seems to use a 'cunning pattern of excelling nature,' equally surprising us by the melody and tones of her voice and by the propriety and grace of her acting.

The judgment of this anonymous critic, though crudely expressed, shrewdly foresounded the unanimous chorus of praise throughout Europe during the next ten years.

Very little was said concerning the other members of the company, but that little was kindly.

During the next ten months, seventy-nine performances were given, usually Tuesday and Saturday evenings, first at the Park Theater, later at the Bowery Theater. The repertory consisted of about a dozen operas, two of them written by Garcia himself. The largest receipts for a single performance were \$1,962; the smallest \$250. The total receipts for the season were \$56,685. Occasionally members of the troupe appeared in concert.

"The Barber of Seville" was repeated twice weekly until January 7, 1826, when Rossini's "Tancredi" was given. The scenery, painted by one of the company was, we read, "of matchless vigor and beauty, displaying magnificent ruins, paintings, etc., so peculiar to modern Italy." Little is recorded of the performance. One anonymous critic wrote that Maria's role was too warlike; he preferred her in the thoroughly feminine role of Rosina.

February 11, 1826, Rossini's "Otello" was given with Garcia in the title part. According to *The Evening Post*, the audience was "astonished by his masterly powers, many of whom had no conception that so much tragic effect could be given in recitative." Maria's performance bewitched the audience by its charm and pathos. Collaboration with Garcia was a serious business. He had given his daughter only a very few days in which to learn the

role of Desdemona and when she remonstrated, he promised her that if she was not perfect in it at the first performance, he would convert the death scene in the last act into a real murder. She was sure he meant what he said and learned her part. In a later performance, after a violent altercation off the stage, Garcia approached his daughter with such a murderous look in his eye that Maria, in real terror, was heard to whisper to him in Spanish: "For God's sake, father, don't kill me." Such a man as this must have made a most realistic and convincing Othello. Edmund Kean, who was playing an engagement at this time in New York, came behind the scenes after the first performance of "Othello," complimented the company on its fine performance and invited them to come the following night to see him play Shakespeare's "Othello."

Lorenzo da Ponte, an Italian, has a permanent place in musical annals because he wrote three librettos for Mozart—"Così fan tutte," "Le Nozze di Figaro" and "Don Giovanni." After a somewhat checkered career in Europe, he settled in New York in 1805 and spent more than thirty years there, making a somewhat precarious living as a teacher of Italian literature. He was naturally much interested in Garcia's enterprise and particularly anxious to have him produce "Don Giovanni," of which he was part author. With the aid of influential friends, he finally persuaded Garcia to undertake the performance. Garcia had already sung in New York three of the four roles that had been considered his best in Europe—Almaviva, Tancredi and Otello—and perhaps he was himself ambitious to show the Americans the fourth, Don Giovanni.

To a man less courageous and executive than Garcia the production would have been a sheer impossibility. Mozart's masterwork requires six good principal singers, a good chorus and a good orchestra. Both Garcia's orchestra and his chorus were weak, and he and his daughter were the only really good singers in his troupe. Even in his prime he, though a tenor, had preferred to sing the role of the amorous Don, written for baritone. This arrangement now left the company without a good tenor. Young Garcia was a baritone capable of singing his father's tenor parts when the older man was indisposed, but to him was assigned the part of Leporello, a bass. Maria was well cast as Zerlina; Madame Garcia and the second soprano divided Donna Anna and Donna Elvira between them. Finally a local tenor was found, who was thought to be capable of singing Don Ottavio's music, and the cast was complete.

May 23, 1826, "Don Giovanni" had its first performance in America and, despite many and obvious shortcomings, was voted a success. Garcia played his part brilliantly, but, as a newspaper writer remarked:

His voice was no longer at home in the simple melodies of Mozart. He must have a wide field for display; he must have ample room to verge enough for unlimited curvetings and flourishes.

It was

a maxim with Garcia that no one can ever be a great singer until the voice be a little impaired; that is, that a singer should depend more on his science than on his natural gifts. By his extraordinary skill he has contrived to hide many vocal defects, and in his time obtained the reputation of the first tenor singer in Europe. On this account he is not so successful in Mozart as in Rossini.

Maria was completely successful as Zerlina; the others acquitted themselves tolerably, except the tenor, who was a miserable failure. One amusing misadventure is recorded of this performance. In the *finale* of the first act, things began to go from bad to worse—chorus, principals, and orchestra, all at cross-purposes. Facing complete disaster, Garcia, with drawn sword in hand, rushed to the footlights, stopped the performance, and ordered the conductor to recommence the *finale*. The second time the act was brought to a more or less harmonious close.

In August, 1826, "The Barber" was given its fortieth performance. There was some talk of the company's establishing itself permanently in New York, but the plan was abandoned and finally, on the 30th of September, the long season came to an end, as it had begun, with the ever-popular "Barber." The last performance was a fine one. Garcia was in his best voice; Maria was in her most brilliant form and in the Lesson Scene delighted her hearers with two English songs, a French air, and a Spanish song with guitar accompaniment. The other singers, too, were applauded and New York's first season of Grand Opera came to a happy termination.

A few days later Garcia left New York with his troupe for Mexico. Maria alone stayed behind. In March she had married, probably at her father's command, a Frenchman named Malibran, who was more than twice her age, but reputed rich. The marriage was a failure in every way. Maria spent the following winter in New York, singing occasionally in Grace Church and in performances of English opera. Then she sailed away, without her husband, to Europe, where a career of unequalled brilliance awaited her.

Mexico was settling its political differences in 1826, as in 1914, by bloodshed, but Garcia once again showed himself able to surmount all difficulties and played a remunerative season in Mexico City. In the spring, laden with some \$30,000, including 1000 ounces of gold, he left for Vera Cruz, where he was to embark for Europe, but, before he could reach the seacoast, he was waylaid by bandits and relieved of all his worldly goods. Eventually he reached Paris, where, after a few farewell performances with his daughter Maria, he resumed his teaching and died in 1832.